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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1874  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5352  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8945  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6521  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4350  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2339  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000196

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: MLS DIRECTOR MEETING WITH AGRICULTURE  
MINISTER

REF: RANGOON 175

Classified By: Pol Officer Sean O'Neill for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

1. (C) During a March 24 meeting in Nay Pyi Taw with EAP/MLS Director Stephen Blake and Charge, Minister of Agriculture and head of the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), Major General Htay Oo, acknowledged that USDA will play a role in the 2010 elections, but stopped short of saying it will form a political party. Htay Oo deflected criticism of the GOB's human rights record, suggesting that the regime's critics should visit to see the reality. He confidently suggested, "The majority of the people like us." The Minister described what he regards as Burma's significant agricultural achievements. Falling crop prices and financial sanctions have affected Burma's farmers, but their exports will continue to help alleviate world hunger. Mr. Blake and Charge expressed strong concern over the recent curtailment of the Tripartite Core Group's (TCG) powers. The Minister acknowledged the TCG's successes to date but did not comment further. End Summary.

USDA and the 2010 Elections - We Have No Enemies

2. (C) Mr. Blake and Charge asked about the 2010 elections, noting that freeing all political prisoners to participate would help the international community to consider an election free and fair. Echoing the regime's party line, Htay Oo assured us the 2010 elections would indeed be "free and fair" and deflected criticism of the GOB's human rights record, suggesting that the regime's critics should visit the country to see how good things are. He said, "Stability and peace are the main requirements for development," and expressed confidence that "the majority of the people like us."

3. (C) When asked about USDA's role in 2010, Htay Oo said the mass-member organization has 25 million members and is youth-based, with the aim to safeguard the unity of Burma, including by engaging in charitable works and explaining "the situation" to the people. USDA will help elect those "who

will contribute to the stability and development of the nation." He declined to say whether USDA would organize as a party or field any candidates, saying only that some of those elected may well be USDA members. Htay Oo noted that there are people in Burma who "dislike the government, but the government gives assistance to all." He declared that "USDA has no enemies, only friends."

#### Agriculture, Sanctions, and the Financial Crisis

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¶4. (C) Following a lengthy recitation of statistics evidencing Burma's agricultural progress, the Minister turned to international sanctions and their alleged impact on farmers and merchants. Htay Oo explained that Burma exports its surplus rice as part of its commitment to reduce world hunger in response to the UN's Millennium Development Goals. Unfortunately, many markets are out of direct reach due to U.S. sanctions, forcing farmers and merchants to circumvent via costly "middlemen." Htay Oo claimed the impact of the sanctions is borne almost exclusively by farmers and merchants, not the GOB.

¶5. (C) Htay Oo said the global financial crisis has affected farmers and merchants through depressed crop prices. The Ministry of Agriculture can't raise prices but tries to "make ways and means" to help farmers produce more with less. When asked about a reported farm credit crisis, Htay Oo declined to discuss in detail possible solutions, saying only that the GOB would consider providing credit on a case by case basis.

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#### Nargis and the TCG

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¶6. (C) Charge and Mr. Blake noted that the USG has contributed nearly USD75 million thus far in cyclone relief and made clear that the recent curtailment of the TCG's visa-granting powers and new restrictions on the activities of NGOs (reftel) have raised concerns in Washington. Htay Oo expressed gratitude for U.S. contributions to the Nargis relief effort and described his ministry's efforts to rebuild livelihoods and repair damage to farms and infrastructure in the delta. He acknowledged the TCG's successes and pledged to continue to cooperate with the international community, but he did not address the recent curtailment of the TCG's visa-issuing powers.

#### Comment

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¶7. (C) Whether a true believer or consummate salesman, Htay Oo seems to delight in extolling the regime's virtues. For a GOB official, he is also unusually comfortable entertaining foreign visitors. With the instincts of a politician and Burma's largest mass-member organization behind him, Htay Oo is a man to watch in 2010. On the TCG, we heard later from a senior Agriculture official that the Minister clearly heard the USG message of concern in the meeting about the TCG and intends to convey it up the chain.

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